



What Teachers Want From Their Coaches

By Joseph Wise and David Sundstrom

During the 2009-10 school year we recruited research and development partners to examine mountains of data; data that we hoped would clarify precisely what *effective* instructional coaching is—and is not. In addition to diving into published materials, our team solicited and compiled from teachers their personal perspectives on what it takes to trust, to accept, and to ultimately reflect on feedback from building leaders, coaches, and mentors during any form of “coaching.” This work ultimately became the starting point for our *Power of Coaching—Teachers and Teaching* project.

The most alarming component of the research, surveys and focus groups surprised us: current educators—to a statistically significant degree—expressly disparage the work they perform, and the profession that they have chosen. Responses came close to matching job satisfaction results of United States postal workers—workers who commonly work in isolated, windowless environments, have little or no autonomy or decision-making authority, and report to supervisors commonly perceived as micro-managers.¹

So what went wrong in teaching? It appears a lot. Among factors contributing to job dissatisfaction, the biggest appears to be a sense of powerlessness; a perceived inability to take charge of one’s own professional destiny as an educator. As Price Pritchett noted (in comments arising from workplace studies outside of education, but remarkably apt), “Powerlessness produces despair, a *what’s-the-use*-attitude, that stifles enthusiasm and saps energy.” Pritchett added that when individuals are led to believe that they cannot shape their own circumstances, when they feel whipped-about, they *learn* to behave helplessly. When individuals view the future as not only unknown but (psychologically or otherwise) dangerous, their belief in their own helplessness ratchets upwards, and compounds their sense of powerlessness. “That belief, in turn, becomes their reality.”

When it comes to instructional coaching, and to potentially changing the teaching satisfaction paradigm, seven compelling themes emerged from published data, survey responses from 1,200 teachers (located within four geographic regions within the United States) and 252 teacher-participants in focus groups:²

¹ Linda Marie, *What Are the Causes of Postal Worker Stress?* Contributing Writer, eHow.com.

² The research team behind the *Power of Coaching* project engaged a cross-section of teaching professionals throughout the country with a straightforward survey on the perceptions, priorities, behaviors and beliefs around coaching. Teachers in four regions of the nation completed a nine-question anonymous survey based upon an extensive literature review. The literature spanned PreK-12 education as well as other business and other sectors’ treatment and practices in employee and client coaching. Seven of the survey questions were requested a ranking of items in order of importance to the teacher-respondent. Two survey questions were open-ended and allowed for each individual teacher’s “voice” to be heard. Several of the open-ended responses have been included throughout this book. Our research revealed an interesting and compelling range of issues important to teachers with respect to coaches and their coaches.

1. Trust

Consistently, teachers at all grade levels identified *trust* as the most critical component of any instructional coaching relationship. In response to more probing questions in survey groups, teachers spoke of trust in terms of confidentiality of work observed, reliability of holding next-step conversations without fear of formal or informal reprisals, and actual follow-up on commitments to return to classrooms in support of teaching and learning.³

2. Competence as a Coach

The majority of teachers surveyed stressed:

- That *longevity* in classroom teaching does not equate to *competency* in classroom teaching;
- That an assumption exists within American public education that longevity *equals* mastery, and that coaching is primarily structured to reward time-in-the-system as opposed to having any relationship to “*ability-to-effectively-communicate/teach*,”
- That to be meaningful, coaching requires *inquiry* into observed teaching behaviors and proffered alternative behaviors to maximize effectiveness (not simply judgments without effort to obtain insight or context).⁴

The range of our team’s findings, both in the broader survey of 1,200 responses from slightly more than 1,800 surveyed (82% response rate) and the focus groups involving approximately 252 invited participants yielded seven (7) consistent and significant themes.

³ Thirty nine (39) percent of teacher respondents rated trust highest in what they required from a coach. Fifteen (15) percent rated trust as second most important. In the forced ranking (highest to lowest) scale, and open-ended and spoken responses, 54% of the responding-teachers related trust in terms of confidentiality of work observed, reliability of holding next-step conversations and follow-up on promises to return to classrooms to support teaching and learning as their highest priority as very high in importance. These results were even stronger among focus group participants who responded than among survey participants. We also we learned from the responses read and heard that “opening up the door to trust comes with detailed qualities ranging from listening to my needs without judgement, being approachable to discuss my failures with honesty and sharing...successes and shortcomings [as] a classroom teacher.” This response received strong support by a majority of members in each focus group conducted.

As a point of clarity for our research team one interview highlighted these results in a real-life example. While conducting components of this research in one school, an instructional coach was observed conducting a formal observation. When queried about this practice, the principal indicated she used the coach in several capacities, the first being an instructional coach, the second being an evaluator of poor instruction. The latter use of the coach was then leveraged to help counsel or due-process ineffective teachers out of the profession. While ineffective teachers must either step-up their craft or move out, this practice impaired the coach’s effectiveness by using the coach also as an evaluator helped to create distrust with the teacher staff members. Trust. Once lost or abused trust is almost impossible to regain.

⁴ One responding teacher noted that (instructional) coaches need to have been successful classroom teachers. Forty five (45) percent of respondents indicated they strongly agreed with that statement. It's not acceptable for coaches to have been marginal or ineffective teachers. Too often we hear of teachers having been moved into a coaching position due to longevity in the classroom. Using time on the job as an indicator of mastery appears at best ill-

3. Providing Feedback Respectfully and With Specificity

Teachers ranked as “highly critical” the precise methods a coach relies upon to provide feedback on observed teaching behaviors—effective or ineffective. They uniformly identified a need for pre- and post-observation conferences; conferences in which specific teaching behaviors are identified, the rationale for their significance discussed, and—most importantly— broad generalizations are wholly avoided. Particularly for post-observation meetings, teacher expressly and without hesitation stressed the need for specificity, both in behaviors observed and in recommendations (if any) for change.⁵ A substantial number expressed dissatisfaction with feedback invariably described in terms such as “fuzzy,” “unclear,” “vague,” “ambiguous” and “equivocal.”

4. Don’t Make Assumptions About Individual Abilities

Survey and focus-group participants overwhelmingly agreed that in any coaching scenario, teachers need to be treated as professionals. Further, participants went on to disclose the following:

- The majority believe that they are in a “continuously-learning” mode;
- According to more than 36% of participants, assumptions are being made about their content and pedagogy knowledge that do not always reflect their actual abilities or understanding;
- Focus group participants consistently concurred with this following statement: “Exposure to materials being introduced into a curriculum does not equate to professional development relating to those materials;”
- Substantial numbers concurred with a Chicago teacher’s statement that “telling me how to do it is not necessarily enough to ensure [that] I’ll immediately be doing it effectively.”
- Multiple focus group participants stated that they “strongly agreed” with the statement “Teachers need to be allowed to make mistakes when they attempt new things . . . and to not be judged solely by the results of those attempts.”

5. I May Learn Differently Than You Do—Please Consider My Learning Style

Coach recognition of—or failure to acknowledge—different teacher learning styles was

conceived. Using a slim snapshot of instruction to make general suggestions is often seen as “instructionally incompetent”. Attempting to coach without full context of the classroom, students, or teachers sets the intention of coaching on the wrong path.

In terms of continuous growth as a coach, Silsbee (2008) offered that we as coaches should engage in “mastery in working with our own habits earns us the right to do the same with [those] we coach.”

⁵ Teachers indicated a need for pre- and post-visitation conferences that embedded constructive and useful feedback. While anecdotal evidence and informal conversations were reported as generally welcomed, teachers expressed that they wanted specific examples of area(s) in need of improvement or worthy of commendation. We cannot stress enough that specific, targeted and timely feedback is crucial to ensure validity of the coaching process. Fifty five (55) percent of respondents rated specific feedback as critical to their teaching craft.

identified as a critical concern of 497 survey respondents. The complaints among focus group participants evidenced similar trepidation. Focus group participants in particular revealed that what made them empathic and more sensitive to their students' needs were their *own* experiences as learners with different needs. They stressed that coaches and those engaged in providing professional development needed to have that same sensitivity and awareness with adult/teacher learners. These expressed concerns bear out findings by Parini (2005) in *The Art of Teaching*; for coaching to have consequential results, it must be tailored to the individual readiness level of each individual teacher.

6. Change without Meaningful Opportunity for Input is Change For the Sake of Change

A repeated theme among survey and focus group participants was evident: teachers feel “helpless” or “powerless” when new initiatives, a change of administration or a shift in district philosophy takes place without consultation, and without opportunity for discussion. As one participant put it “I’m no longer an individual who is valued or even on radar [when a policy change abruptly occurs]. It’s as if everything I’ve worked for, along with my identity as a teacher, is simply not a factor in decisions affecting my students and my own profession.” 47% of survey respondents additionally expressed inflexible structural changes—along with unexplained structural changes— as causal to loss of teacher identity, professionalism, and creativity.

7. Quality of our Relationship is Important to me

Building a relationship before plowing into the major components of instructional coaching was identified as one of the most critical of indicators of coaching effectiveness. According to teachers surveyed:

- a) One-on-one coaching sessions are most highly valued, and
- b) Performance-evaluation *by a coach*—for employment or compensation purposes—are vehemently opposed; “coaching differs from judging.”

Trust and confidentiality are the two components most highly rated by teachers engaged in an instructional coaching relationship. Objectivity is a quality expected from a coach when reflecting with teachers (56%). Teachers want to collaborate with coaches (as opposed to being expected to unquestioningly follow coaching directives). 54 % of teachers desire advanced notice of times a coach is going to visit their classrooms. (Note: The significance of this need for “advanced notice” appears reflective of apprehension and distrust; key indicators that an effective coaching relationship has yet to be formed.)

Research has long-established that trusting relationships are the most effective relationships. With trust comes the freedom to speak candidly, and to risk failure throughout ongoing efforts to improve. Our research revealed that perhaps a substantial numbers of teachers are reticent to engage in genuine exploration with coaches due to a belief—sometimes misguided but sometimes not—that their coach is an adversary. Notably, a teacher within one focus group vehemently disparaged the role of the coach and stated:

"They are not in my classroom everyday, they aren't even responsible for students any longer, of course they can give feedback, but in the end it's up to me to ensure my students are successful."

Without doubt it is the classroom teacher who is primarily responsible for academic growth among his or her students. But in denigrating the role of coach—or identifying the teacher-coach relationship as adversarial—barriers to collaboration and growth are artificially imposed, and much can be lost.

We have a duty—whether we are serving as an instructional leader, a coach, mentor or a “boss”—to do all we can to enable our teachers to take charge of their own professional destinies. If teachers are to be effective, they must be—and know—that they control their own teaching artistry. Teachers further need to be conscious of their own strengths. In coaching, it becomes crucial to clarify that acknowledgement of an ineffective teaching behavior is *not* a denigration of other strengths, and cannot be allowed to override positive work.

To change ineffective teaching behaviors, we must start with recognition of an individual's behaviors that *are* already effective—and tap into each individual's own personal source of power, own sources of energy, and own sense of control over his or her professional abilities. The point of entry into every formal and informal coaching conversation must start with and remain grounded in the teacher's strengths, especially when we want to explore areas of opportunity for the teacher to change, to grow, and to improve his or her craft.

Joseph Wise and David Sundstrom are the principals researchers and authors of *Power of Coaching—Teachers and Teaching*, published and released in July, 2010 by *Atlantic Research Partners* (www.atlanticresearchpartners.org).